

Queensland Floods – Andrews Story

Car family saved from floodwaters

16th January 2011

Photos

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WHEN Andrew Neil began his shift at the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service's special operations unit last Monday, he had no idea of the drama and heartache which lay ahead.

Within hours, the 44-year-old swift water rescue expert was risking his life to save Lockyer Valley residents caught up in the state's worst flooding disaster in 37 years.

Among those who owe the Kawana Waters man their life is a young mother who was trapped alongside her husband and young son on top of their 4WD

Images of them being swept away by the raging torrent captivated and horrified people around the world.

What they didn't see was Mr Neil throwing himself into the "inland tsunami" in a brave attempt to save them.

Yesterday, he told Daily reporter *OWEN JACQUES* about a day which will be seared into his memory forever. This is his story in his own words:

IT was kind of a bizarre day, really.

My normal station officer is away.

I had this new officer, Brad (Millsy) Mills, it was his first day on that shift.

We were at Special Ops on Monday morning and there was a small incident going on, on the northside that they sent another special ops team to.

Millsy said, "What's going on here? Why aren't we going to this?"

I said, "Don't worry about it mate – they're saving us for the big one."

There is a saying in the service when someone leaves, you say, "See you at the big one".

THE CALL: lunchtime

WE were checking equipment at lunchtime and were told to go to Withcott, towards Toowoomba.

We had no idea what was going on out there.

We switched to Ipswich communications after an hour and you could hear all these incidents starting to happen.

We got to a bridge at Helidon (105km west of Brisbane) and you couldn't cross this bridge – the water was about 1km across and the normal creek was 50 metres wide.

They said there were three people on a car that had been washed off a bridge.

The car is the white four-wheel-drive Subaru that had a father, mother and son clinging to its roof. The image was broadcast worldwide and will remain an enduring and chilling reminder of what Queenslanders have battled.

DIVING INTO A TSUNAMI:3pm Monday, seven hours into shift.

WE couldn't see them and someone pointed, way over the other side

We looked at each other. There's not much we can do from here. What can we do?

So Channel 7 was hovering around and taking footage, so we got in contact with them.

They landed while we got into our wetsuits.

We thought, "Well, we've got a couple of options. We can get downstream and try to intercept the car downstream or they can get a hold of something".

One option I came up with, because of the helicopter training, I told Millsy "Give me three lifejackets and drop me on the car".

We got airborne in the Channel 7 helicopter because this was the photo of the mother, father and son on the white car – this was that incident.

We couldn't see the car anymore. There was no sign of them.

"THERE SHE IS"

I SPOTTED her in a tree. I spotted the mother in a tree.

There was no sign of either of them (the son or the father who were last seen with her).

Downstream and off to the side an island had formed.

We got the Seven chopper to land us there.

If she let go of where she was, we thought we could get to her if she came past the island.

There was just water rushing past her.

I ended up making my way to her by swimming.

First I swam across to a tree downstream to get into a back eddy.

The volume of water moving in one direction creates streams of water moving in the opposite direction along the sides. Mr Neil swam to that eddy and was pushed upstream of the stranded woman.

I didn't have anything tied to me, just my lifejacket and my PFD (personal flotation device).

The stuff in the water was amazing – fridges, tractor tyres and a brown snake went flying past.

We used this eddy to get to her.

We got up to her and made contact in the trees – by this time the water had started dropping and there was another little island further back.

Millsy came back, swam the eddy and brought a PFD and brought her back to the island

We then waited for a rescue helicopter to come and pick us up.

She was shattered. The woman, Jenny, had lost her husband and her son.

I was trying to reassure her that we had people downstream and that anything was possible.

We flew back to the (Helidon bridge, where the truck was parked) in the helicopter

All that probably took over the space of an hour.

We're back on the bridge and the helicopter is downstream and they actually found the boy clinging to a piece of farm machinery... a wheat harvester or something.

He was 2km downstream of where we found the mother.

There had been no sign of the car when we got airborne.

It wasn't a good feeling. Our options were very, very limited from where we were.

That was the start of the day.

I didn't think I was at risk at all. Obviously there was an element.

We just had to use the skills we're provided with.

You have sort of a contingency plan if you don't make it across to a tree. Part of your training is to protect yourself in that situation if you end up downstream.

You get training on how to read the water.

Years and years growing up in surf lifesaving (at Alexandra Headland) helps in understanding water movement.

Being in big water isn't a big worry but it is when you have the snakes and rats.

We never gave up (on finding the father and son alive). Anything is possible. That was proven as people were found downstream clinging on to trees, machinery.

A FLOATING HOUSE AND A WALL OF WATER

THE call came through that there was a house floating downstream with people on its roof.

And we're looking at each other thinking "Is that possible?"

We got airborne and there were reports it was heading down towards Helidon.

There were other reports about this seven-metre wall of water.

As it turns out, this was the seven-metre wall of water.

We searched for maybe 15 minutes upstream. Then we were getting low on fuel... the only fuel was in Toowoomba so we did a quick dash there, refuelled. It was tricky flying through that storm.

Mr Neil was "stuck to the window" as they flew above Toowoomba, watching small creeks transformed into murky rapids that spread a kilometre wide and gouged giant swathes from the countryside.

That's when the call came through with an exact location.

The crew told us, "We can't winch with you guys on board so we'll put you down over here in this grass clearing".

When we landed, these people mobbed us –“My husband's missing and my friend has been washed away in a car”.

Millsy told them to back up and said, “Hang on we need to know where we are”.

They said we were in Grantham.

GRANTHAM: 6.30pm Monday – 10.5 hours after start of shift.

FROM the air, you could see roofs sticking out. It was just massive volumes of water.

There were a couple of helicopters winching nearby and as it got dark, the helicopters disappeared.

Actually, once they dropped the two people off, they said, “Do you want a lift out of here”.

I said, “No way, we're here for the night”.

That was it, we were in Grantham.

So far, 15 bodies have been retrieved from the small town and scores more have been put on a “missing” list as the township counts the tragedy's toll.

The people who were left were worried about this seven-metre wave and we were trying to reassure them it wasn't going to happen, even though we didn't know ourselves.

We said we needed to set up communications.

Some other guys came up from Brisbane and came across our fire truck (which they had abandoned at Helidon earlier) and thought “something bad has happened”.

We were trying to get (Grantham) organised and in the meantime you could see people on roofs yelling out.

The locals were telling us they know there's people up this one street.

We got someone to draw us a mud map of which road ran where – you couldn't make out anything.

You could hear people yelling out a long way in the distance.

PIGS, COWS AND A TORCH

WE had our wetsuits and booties, our full swift water equipment on.

Millsy had a handheld radio and I had a Dolphin torch.

We tried to get communications to tell them to send everything they could.

We just said, “This town has been levelled”.

We were yelling out to houses that were closer. There was a service station, a house next door, some more on the corner plus the pub.

The water was roaring and there was debris but in the meantime we were searching cars, against roofs and against the railway line.

We were basically on the edge of the railway bridge.

At one stage I thought there was someone, a survivor on the railway bridge.

About halfway up there was movement but it was a pig, just sitting there.

Another time all of a sudden this cow appeared, and went “moo” – all of a sudden there's this cow just washed up.

We're searching vehicles and this is where our work went from swift water rescue into urban search and rescue.

We're trying to gain access over to these houses and there's semi-trailers on their side.

Everything you looked at was just bizarre.

RESCUE BEGINS: Monday 9pm – 13 hours after start of shift.

WE started getting access to the first house.

There was a family of two girls, we got them out and we walked them back through the water.

We got to the pub – there were five people in there.

It copped a real big impact – the people told us about this house next door with three people in it that had just folded in on itself and washed away.

It was just the two of us until about 10pm. Another swift water rescue crew from Ipswich made entry from the other side of town.

Shortly after they arrived, a special emergency response team (SERT) arrived.

They had a 40-tonne front-end loader.

It was a machine with spotlights blaring, pushing things out of the way and they had people in the bucket at the front.

Then we started going to every house that had people in it and got people out.

We got 15 people out of some of the surviving houses and then we just started searching through ones that had been half flattened.

We were starting to get a rough idea of how many hadn't made it.

We got the torch out as we approached a house and Millsy said, “What are these eyes, is it a dog?”

It was a cow on a veranda.

We got to the people inside and they said, “It's not our cow”. It had just floated on to the veranda.

Mr Neil points to his young daughter Emmy who has been quietly listening to the interview for about 30 minutes.

Little Emmy was watching all this on TV.

We ended up walking out after everything had been cleared as much as we could with the resources we had.

GATTON BASE: 3am – 19 hours after shift started.

THEY took us back to Gatton. We drove back in our truck.

One of the crews had collected our truck and went to Grantham. It was there at that stage. We don't know how it got there really.

We had a hot shower, got out of the wetsuit. That was nice after 12 hours in the wetsuit.

Mr Neil was back on shift from lunchtime Tuesday and was called to return to Grantham the following night as other "fresh" crews needed the benefit of his experience. Their task was to rescue six people trapped on a roof but it appeared to have been a miscommunication. The crews then helped residents obtain medication and much-needed oxygen cylinders before again returning to Gatton.